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Politics and People

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Calling a Halt

Washington.

When at last a counsel of common sense interrupted the Washington race of the blabbermouths to be the first to give away the most of American military intelligence and its methods by loose talk, congressional initiates accepted as a matter of course that the voice of discretion would be that of George H. Mahon, of Texas, as it was.

Such is the respect in which the Texas legislator is held in the Capital, moreover, that there is reason to expect that his words of caution will gradually brake the absurdity of officialdom showering gratuitous details upon the Russians about how American espionage works and what it knows. A telling item is that Mr. Mahon is better informed on the subject than almost any of the headline hunters who have been blazoning all they could learn or guess, the product of more than twenty years at the point of origin of all military appropriations.

By virtue of his place as chairman of the House subcommittee handling defense funds, for example, the non-talkative Mr. Mahon has a familiarity with the secrecy-shrouded amounts dispensed by the Central Intelligence Agency equal to that of the agency's director, John A. McCone, who, by all the signs, has been doing a great deal of extracurricular talking during the marathon debate over Cuba. Similarly, the rangy, rawboned Texan is equipped with balanced, authentic information on operations beyond the reach of the loudest of those who consider they serve the country by fatuously raising roadblocks against its intelligence services. These have now been put on notice that to tell the enemy what we know is to lead him to the sources of the information, which will then be missing when next needed.

It was a rare burst of indignation that broke the prevailing Mahon calm and sent him to the House floor to

sound his alarm and insist upon an end to the folly, which he stamped as both outrageous and intolerable.

His words were intended impartially both for colleagues on Capitol Hill and for the executive arm. Although the speaker made no point of it, the Cuban controversy had all but disappeared following the Russian backdown until Attorney General Robert Kennedy inexplicably revived it by rehashing the question of air cover at the Bay of Pigs.

Since that brotherly indiscretion there has been an unending parade of intelligence operatives to Capitol Hill, some open and some furtive, to tell what they know or suspect, as the dispute swung to the issue of the date upon which it was determined that aggressive weapons were planted in Cuba. Various ends were served. Some were baldly partisan, some represented attempts by officials to put themselves in the clear and shift reproach to others.

Mr. Mahon made disapproving note that the White House had permitted itself to be prodded into sending Defense Secretary Robert McNamara before the camera for a nation-wide expose of the photographic means that traced the missile build-up, providing a priceless store of information for a presumably attentive Russian intelligence. That questionable knuckling under to criticism, incidentally, had an odd sequel of its own.

Objections were raised that the briefing indicated a considerable reconnaissance gap between early September and mid-October. Subsequently the Pentagon issued its official transcript of the briefing. Close study turned up in the transcript the citation of four photo flights on dates that had been unmentioned in the live briefing. Incidents of the kind on both sides of the argument have excited wonderment as to who is leveling with whom, if any.

A congressman who feels he has been had refuses to attend State Department briefings for lawmakers, contending that deliberately misleading information was dispensed by the department before the Administration conceded that Russian rockets were on Cuban sites. Thomas Pelly, a Washington Republican, said that on the same day last September that he received department assurances that there was no evidence of offensive capability in Cuba another department spokesman was confiding to a House committee

Significantly, the committee to which the second spokesman was talking was that headed by Mr. Mahon. All of its sessions are behind closed doors, and witnesses from the executive department are accustomed to the use of candor there. A detected departure from this rule could be costly at appropriation time. Mr. Pelly complains that the information offered Congress generally was a tranquilizer intended to lull and manipulate.

Mr. Mahon, who is recognized as ranking high among the knowledgeable and responsible men in Congress, deplored that testimony was being recorded by intelligence officials whose effective functioning depends upon their being neither seen nor heard. His plea was for a measure of responsibility. It seems a reasonable enough request.